

From the Baltimore Sun

Howard's tree program blossoms beyond expectations

By Sandy Alexander
sun reporter

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In 2004, Howard County Tourism expected to take up to five years to plant 1,000 Kwanzan cherry trees that would beautify the county and create a blossom-filled destination for visitors each spring.

With a commitment from Camberley Homes to put 275 of the trees in its new Riverwood development in [Ellicott City](#), the Blossoms of Hope project has surpassed its goal by five trees and more than two years.

"We kind of have to pinch ourselves that it happened so quickly," said Rachelina Bonacci, director of the tourism organization.

She also said organizers see no reason to stop. "D.C. has 3,000 trees," she said. "I think we could catch them."

In addition to creating an attractive environment, 30 percent of the purchase or sponsorship price of every tree goes to the Claudia Mayer Cancer Resources and Image Center at Howard County General Hospital.

That was an important motivation for Kathy Hubbard, a sales counselor for the 75-home Riverwood community, which is being built off Homewood Road.

Having lost a friend and a family member to breast cancer recently, Hubbard said she was attracted to the Blossoms of Hope project as a community outreach activity and brought it to her supervisors.

"It's a perfect fit," she said. "In the end our neighborhood will look really nice ... and we will help people."

Organizers are also looking to homeowners in the county to expand the Blossoms project. Last month they started a residential program that invites individuals to buy cherry trees for their properties.

Prices range from \$125 to \$600 depending on the size of the tree and whether the buyer plans to plant it. The tourism office plans to offer two pick-up days each year for do-it-yourself planters.

The project started with 20 trees along Route 108 in Centennial Park and expanded to other parks, libraries and cultural sites in the county. The trees on public property can be sponsored - and marked with a plaque - by individuals or companies for \$500.

Corporate sponsors have purchased and planted an additional 73 cherry trees. The State Highway Administration bought 250 trees for plantings on county roads.

"The growth of our cherry tree project is unprecedented," said County Executive James N. Robey in a statement. "In record time, the community has embraced our vision and now, thanks to our newest partner, Camberley Homes, plantings in Howard County's residential communities will begin this fall."

Now that a significant number of trees are planted, the tourism office needs to move into the next phase, which is promoting them as a tourist attraction, said Amanda Hof, Howard County Tourism's special events and projects manager.

Noting the popularity of cherry blossoms in Washington, Hof said, "We want to let our neighbors know we have something here that is pink and beautiful too."

A "Cherrybration" event is in the planning stages for the spring, and Hof said a guide directing people to the blossoms is a logical next step. Bonacci said the tourism office plans to hire a part-time coordinator for the Blossoms of Hope Program in January. That expansion follows the addition of a two-person team dedicated to sales and marketing.

Bonacci said as Howard County Tourism celebrates its 25th anniversary, it is making a transition from a small tourism organization to a more substantial conference and visitors bureau.

Among the next steps, she said, is to increase the organization's budget. Funding is currently provided by member organizations, a county grant generated by a hotel/motel tax, a state grant and fundraisers.

Bonacci and her staff are also exploring a move to a larger and more up-to-date location that will serve as a county welcome center, offices and possibly public meeting space.

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Information on Blossoms of Hope and Howard County Tourism:
www.visithowardcounty.com. The next pick-up day for residential trees is Nov.
11, but they have to be reserved by Oct. 28.

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